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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BANGKOK 000045

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/07/2020
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [PINS](#) [PHUM](#) [TH](#)
SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR ASSISTANT SECRETARY SHAPIRO

REF: BANGKOK 3116

Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Assistant Secretary Shapiro, Embassy Bangkok welcomes you to Thailand. Despite ongoing domestic discord and current inward focus, Thailand's strategic importance to the U.S. cannot be overstated. Your visit provides an opportunity to signal the United States' appreciation for the long-standing bilateral relationship, which has facilitated shared benefits in the fields of security, law enforcement, and intelligence efforts, as well as groundbreaking health/research collaboration and long-standing refugee support. In just the last three months alone, the U.S.-Thai partnership has yielded a promising new lead in the drive to develop an HIV vaccination and the seizure of more than 35 tons of North Korean weapons, two examples which serve to illustrate the depth and breadth of a relationship. In late December, the Thai Cabinet approved a supplemental budget to facilitate the delayed peacekeeping deployment to Darfur.

12. (C) As your visit will take place in the run up to the expected U.S.-Thai Strategic Dialogue, Thai interlocutors will likely be interested in pursuing discussions on strategic views of regional security challenges and how the U.S.-Thai alliance can be focused to assist as Thailand prepare for threats. The Thai will look to discuss U.S. assistance through bilateral exercises and training, and helping the Thai military modernize either by means of procuring U.S. defense articles or via the hoped for receipt of excess defense articles by way of Thailand's status as a Major Non-NATO Ally, as Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya raised in 2009 with Secretary Clinton and other senior USG officials. In addition, with the Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters (RTARF) preparing for a difficult deployment to UNAMID in Darfur, the Thai military will look to explore ways whereby the U.S. can assist.

POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

13. (SBU) The last eighteen months were turbulent for Thailand. Court decisions forced two Prime Ministers from office, and twice the normal patterns of political life took a back seat to disruptive protests in the streets. The yellow-shirted People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) occupied Government House from August to December 2008, shutting down Bangkok's airports for eight days, to protest governments affiliated with ex-Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. The red-shirted United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD), followers of Thaksin, disrupted a regional Asian Summit and sparked riots in Bangkok in mid-April 2009 after Thaksin, now a fugitive abroad in the wake of an abuse of power conviction, called for a revolution to bring him home. 2010 promises to be contentious as well, with Thaksin and the

red shirts having vowed to redouble their efforts to topple the government.

¶4. (C) Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva is a photogenic, eloquent 44-year old Oxford graduate who generally has progressive instincts and says the right things about basic freedoms, social inequities, policy towards Burma, and how to address the troubled deep south, afflicted by a grinding ethno-nationalist Muslim-Malay separatist insurgency. Delivering is another matter, and Abhisit has disappointed us recently on the repatriation of the Lao Hmong and his handling of several foreign investment-related issues. Despite recent higher approval ratings, Abhisit remains beset by a fractious coalition, vigorous parliamentary opposition in the form of a large block of politicians under the Puea Thai Party banner, and street protests from the red-shirts.

¶5. (C) While both yellow and red try to lay exclusive claim to the mantle of democracy, neither side of this split is as democratic as it claims to be. Both movements reflect deep social concerns stemming from widespread perceptions of a lack of social and economic justice, but both seek to triumph in competing for traditional Thai hierarchical power relationships. New elections would not appear to be a viable solution to political divide, and political discord could persist for years. We continue to stress to Thai interlocutors the need for all parties to avoid violence and respect democratic norms within the framework of the constitution and rule of law, as well as our support for long-time friend Thailand to work through its current

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difficulties and emerge as a more participatory democracy.

RECEDING MONARCHY

¶6. (C) Underlying the political tension in Bangkok is the future of the monarchy. On the throne for 62 years, U.S.-born King Bhumibol is Thailand's most prestigious figure, with influence far beyond his constitutional mandate. Many actors are jockeying for position to shape the expected transition period Thailand during royal succession after the eventual passing of the King, who is currently in poor health. Few observers believe that the deep political and social divides can be bridged until after King Bhumibol passes and Thailand's tectonic plates shift. Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn neither commands the respect nor displays the charisma of his beloved father, who greatly expanded the prestige and influence of the monarchy during his 62-year reign. Nearly everyone expects the monarchy to shrink and change in function after succession. How much will change is open to question, with many institutions, figures, and political forces positioning for influence, not only over redefining the institution of monarchy but, equally fundamentally, what it means to be Thai.

SOUTHERN THAILAND - SEPARATIST INSURGENCY

¶7. (C) An ethno-nationalist Malay Muslim insurgency in southern Thailand has claimed an estimated 3,500 lives since ¶2004. The fundamental issues of justice and ethnic identity drive the violence as many Malay Muslims feel that they are second-class citizens in Thailand, and ending the insurgency will require the government to deal with these issues on a national level. The insurgents use IEDs, assassinations, and beheadings to challenge the control of the Thai state in the deep South; the government has responded through special security laws which give security forces expanded power to search and detain people. The Thai military is now deeply involved in counter-insurgency efforts; in the late 1990s-2004, the military viewed the top national security threat to be the flow of illegal narcotics from neighboring Burma.

18. (C) The insurgents direct their anger at the government in Bangkok, not at the United States. Since a U.S. presence or perception of U.S. involvement in the South could redirect that anger towards us and link it to the international jihadist movement -- a link that is currently absent -- we ensure that any offers of assistance or training pass the "location and label" test. Put simply, we keep U.S. military personnel away from the far South and we make sure that we do not label any assistance or training as directly linked to the southern situation. Likewise, we work to avoid feeding rampant, outlandish speculation that we are somehow fomenting the violence in the South in order to justify building permanent bases -- a very sensitive issue in Thailand. We do not want to jeopardize our access to key military facilities in Thailand like Utapao Naval Air Station.

ENDURING BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP

19. (C) Despite the political divide, Thailand's strategic importance to the U.S. should not be understated. The U.S.-Thai military relationship, which began during World War II when the U.S. trained Thais to covertly conduct special operations against the Japanese forces occupying Thailand has evolved into a partnership that provides the U.S. with unique benefits. Thailand remains crucial to U.S. interests in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond. Our military engagement affords us unique training venues, the opportunity to conduct exercises that are nearly impossible to match elsewhere, a willing participant in international peacekeeping operations, essential access to facilities amid vital sea and air lanes that support contingency and humanitarian missions, and a partner that is a key ASEAN nation in which we continue to promote democratic ideals.

110. (C) Thailand's willingness to allow the United States to use Utapao Naval Air Station as the hub for our regional assistance program was key to making the 2004 tsunami and the 2008 Cyclone Nargis relief operations a success. While those high-profile relief operations highlighted publicly the value of access to Utapao, the air base is used regularly for military flights. A prime example was the critical support

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Utapao provided during OEF by providing an air bridge in support of refueling missions en route to Afghanistan. Approximately 1,000 flights transit Utapao every year in support of critical U.S. military operations both regionally and to strategic areas of the world. Thailand also provides valued port access with U.S. naval vessels making calls, primarily at Laem Chabang and Sattahip, over sixty times per year for exercises and visits.

111. (SBU) Beyond traditional military activities, our bilateral military relationship provides benefits in other important areas. One example is the Armed Forces Research Institute of Medical Sciences' (AFRIMS) collaboration with Thai counterparts on basic research and trial vaccines. The sophistication of the Thai scientific and public health community makes collaboration as useful to the USG as it is to the Thais. A number of important breakthroughs, such as in the prevention of HIV/AIDS transmission from mothers to children, were developed here, and the first partially successful phase III, double blind trial for a potential HIV vaccine occurred in 2009; a second such trial run by CDC is currently ongoing.

COBRA GOLD AND THE MILITARY EXERCISE PROGRAM

12 (C) By means of access to good military base infrastructure and large areas to conduct unrestricted operations, Thailand gives the U.S. military a platform for exercises unique in Asia. Thai leaders are far more willing to host multinational and bilateral exercises than are other

countries in Asia. This has allowed us to use exercises in Thailand to further key U.S. objectives, such as supporting Japan's growing military role in Asia and engaging the Indonesian and Singaporean militaries.

¶13. (C) Cobra Gold, the capstone event of our exercise program, is PACOM's largest annual multi-lateral exercise and for 29 years has served to strengthen our relations with Thailand, highlight our commitment to Southeast Asia, and provide exceptional training opportunities for our troops. The event has evolved over the years and now facilitates important objectives such as promoting a greater role in the Asian Pacific region for Japan, Singapore, and South Korea and re-establishing a partner role with Indonesia. Cope Tiger, a leading air exercise with the Thailand and Singapore, and CARAT, a bilateral naval event, are key mechanisms for engagement of the Thai navy and air force. The Thai military continues to highlight to us the significance of these events for training and for relationship building.

PEACEKEEPING EFFORTS AND DARFUR DEPLOYMENT

¶14. (C) Thailand has historically been a strong supporter of UN peacekeeping missions and was an early contributing nation to operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. In addition, Thai generals very effectively led UN forces in East Timor, to which Thailand contributed 1,500 troops, and in Aceh where a Thai general served as the principal deputy of the Aceh Monitoring Mission. Thailand is preparing for deploying a battalion of troops for a difficult UNAMID mission in Darfur and has asked for USG assistance (Ref A). During your visit, the Thai will be very interested in discussing ways ahead on the deployment. Using GPOI funding, we are working with the military to increase its peacekeeping capabilities, both as a contributing nation and as a trainer of neighboring nations.

BORDER CONFLICT WITH CAMBODIA

¶15. (C) Bilateral relations with Cambodia remain volatile, primarily due to a border dispute centered on 4.6 square kilometers of overlapping territorial claims adjacent to the 11th century Hindu Preah Vihear temple. Minor skirmishes have erupted three times since mid-2008, leading to the deaths of seven soldiers. Cambodian Prime Hun Sen's November 2009 decision to appoint Thaksin as an economic advisor further stoked cross-border tensions.

¶16. (C) The roots of the border dispute lie in the Siam-France agreements of 1904-8 and a 1962 International Court of Justice ruling that granted Cambodia the temple but left the rest of disputed land unresolved. Tensions spiked in 2008 when the Thai government in power at that time

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supported Cambodia's application to UNESCO for a joint listing of the temple as a world heritage site, only to face opposition in parliament and an adverse court ruling. Thorny internal political considerations and historical rancor between Thailand and Cambodia make progress difficult. We urge both sides to resolve their differences peacefully through bilateral negotiations, border demarcation, and a reduction of troops deployed along the border.

REFUGEE CONCERNS

¶17. (C) Due to inherent institutional capabilities, the Thai military plays a prominent role in the management of the many refugees that enter Thailand from neighboring countries. Thailand continues to host more than 140,000 Burmese and facilitate resettlement of more than 14,000 refugees to the U.S. annually, but the recent forced repatriation of two groups of Lao Hmong in late December provoked international

outcry. We underscore to the RTG our disappointment with the deportation decision and our continuing concern over access to the Hmong now that they have been returned to Laos. The Thai have asked us privately about possible repercussions due to the deportation.

THE INCREASING ROLE OF CHINA

¶18. (C) As the shape of Southeast Asia, Asia writ large, and the world has changed, so have Thai attitudes. The Chinese have been making a major push to upgrade all aspects of relations, including mil-mil. Thailand is not interested in making a choice between the U.S. and China (nor do we see closer Chinese-Thai relations as automatically threatening to our interests here), but we will need to work harder to maintain the preferred status we have enjoyed. While Thai military links with the United States are deeper and far more apparent than Sino-Thai links, China's growing influence in Thailand is readily evident.

¶19. (C) The Chinese have made a strong effort to court the Thai military. The Thai military has a range of Chinese weapons systems in its arsenal; the PLA Navy is interested in closer links with the Thai navy, and China has worked with Thailand to improve air defense equipment provided to Thailand in the late 1980's. In 2007 and 2008, Thai and Chinese Special Forces conducted joint exercises, and other mil-to-mil exchanges have expanded in recent years, as has the number of bilateral military VIP visits.

¶20. (C) During a visit to Thailand by Chinese Minister of National Defense Liang Guanglie for the King's birthday celebrations in early December 2009, the Thai and Chinese militaries agreed to expand bilateral exercises to include the two nations' navies, marines, and air forces. The initial exercise will be conducted early this year, with the PLA engaging Thai sailors and marines through an amphibious landing event and a naval rescue and humanitarian relief exercise. While some entities within the RTG resisted the expanded engagement, reportedly the MFA and the Marine Commandant, the Thai tell us that the Chinese pushed hard for a rapid expansion of bilateral exercises. The Thai Marines suggested to us that the exercise will be held at the platoon or company level; it is unclear how many Navy personnel may participate.

¶21. (C) The expansion of joint exercises follows China providing Thailand with \$49 million in military assistance following the 2006 coup. Beyond exercises and assistance, the number of exchanges by Thai and Chinese officers studying at military institutes has increased significantly in recent years, particularly since the coup. The PLA has also actively courted Thai military leaders, including Defense Minister Prawit Wongsuwan and Army Commander General Anupong Paojinda, through multiple hosted-visits to China.

JOHN